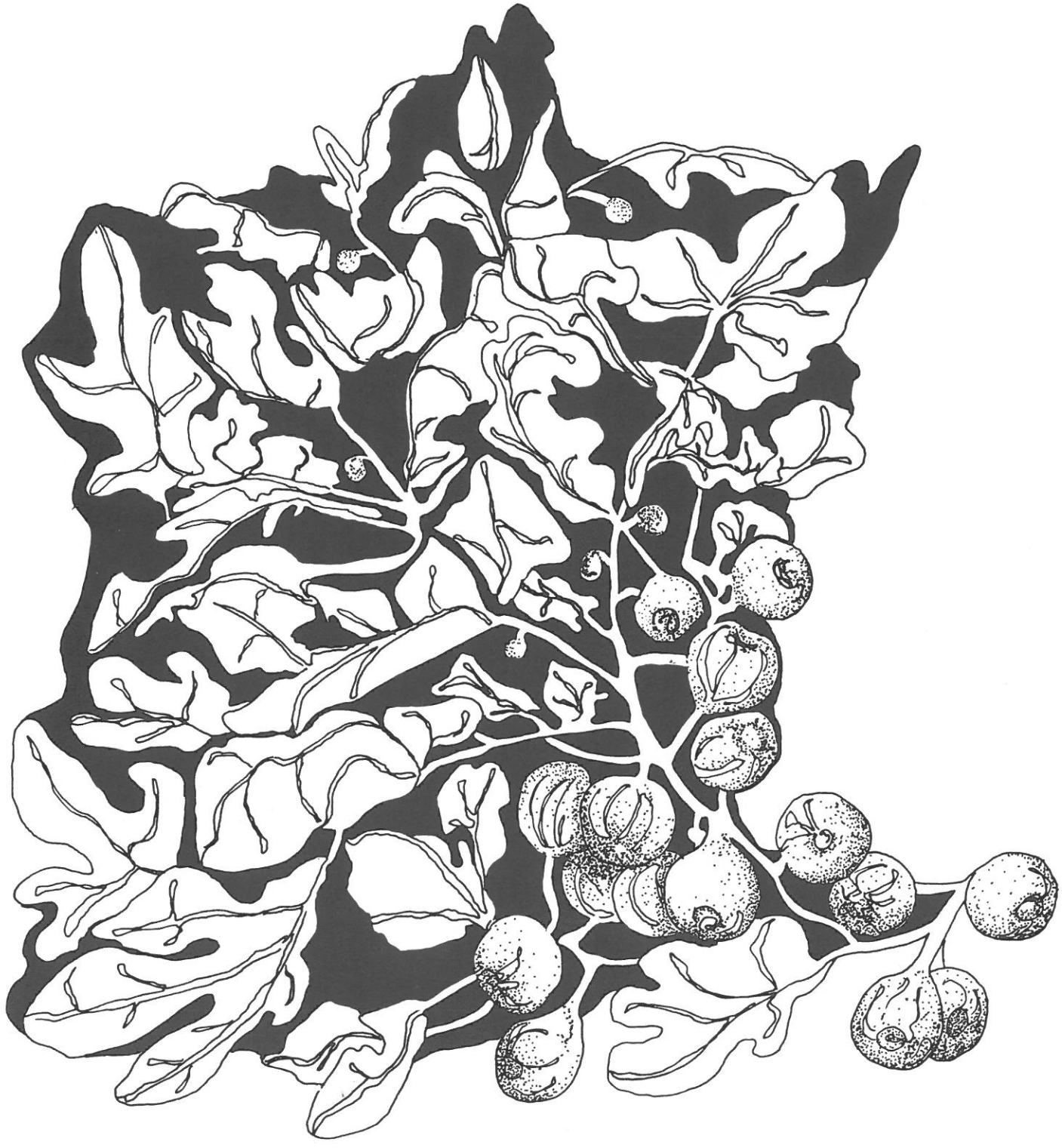
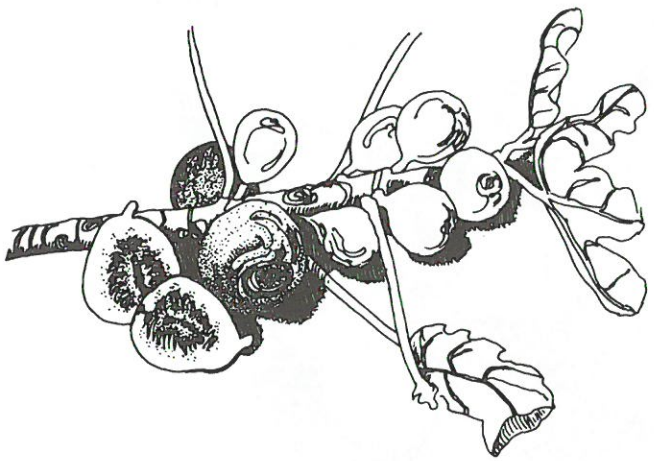
Fig Culture in North Carolina



The fig is native to the Mediterranean Basin. You may already be familiar with some members of the fig family, such as the ornamental rubber tree, the mulberry, and the Osage orange or hedge apple. Figs are grown over much of eastern North Carolina and westward into the Piedmont. If your soil is well-drained and reasonably fertile, you most likely will have success growing figs in North Carolina.

Cold weather and nematodes are two limiting factors affecting fig culture in this state. You cannot do much about the weather, but you can control nematodes.



Suggested Varieties

Celeste is a fairly hardy variety. Its fruit is small and violet or light brown. The pulp is a light strawberry pink. The fruit is good fresh or when used in canning or making preserves. Celeste will begin to ripen its fruit in mid-July.

Brown Turkey is also sold as Texas Everbearing and Harrison. It is not to be confused with the Brown Turkey variety of California. Its fruit is medium to large with a light coppery brown skin and amber pulp. It produces a light crop of large fruit 2 weeks earlier than Celeste and a heavy crop of medium-sized fruit 2 to 3 weeks after Celeste. The fruit has good quality for fresh use and is excellent for preserves. Brown Turkey adapts well to being grown in containers.

Brunswick or **Magnolia** has a large, hollow fruit that is light brown with darker ribs and practically no stem. The pulp is amber. Its fruit splits and sours during hot, humid weather. It is recommended for preserves only. Brunswick appears to be more cold hardy than Brown Turkey or Celeste; however, it does not grow vigorously.

Both **Brown Turkey** and **Brunswick** produce fair-to-good crops on suckers produced the season following freeze or cold injury.

Soil and Site Selection

Figs grow well on a wide range of soils if the soil is well-drained and reasonably fertile. They also prefer a loamy soil that has plenty of organic matter and moisture available during the growing season. A soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 is optimum.

Plant your fig tree where it is protected from both the winter sun and cold winter winds. Unseasonably warm temperatures during the winter may cause growth. If growth begins and a sudden freeze occurs, the plant may be seriously damaged. For this reason, figs planted on northern exposures have a better chance of remaining dormant and escaping sudden freezes, especially in the Piedmont.

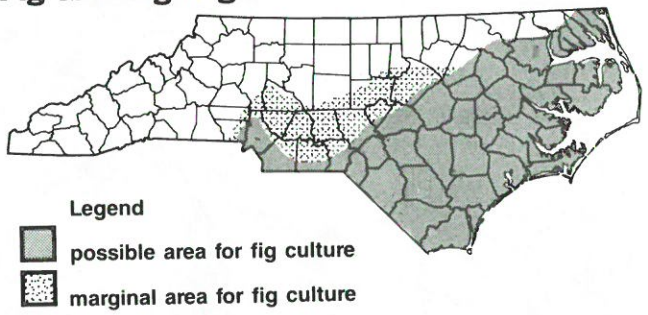
Planting

Dormant, bare-rooted, nursery-grown plants can be set anytime between late fall and early spring. It is best to set them out in the spring when the danger of severe winter temperatures is over. But container-grown plants should be planted just in the spring. Start with plants that are free of root-knot nematode galls. Figs trained as trees should be spaced 15 to 20 feet apart; those grown as bushes require a 10-foot spacing. For optimum growth, give fig plants full sunlight and adequate room to grow. Avoid competition from neighboring trees and shrubs.

Trees. Plant a fig tree 1 to 2 inches deeper than it was in the nursery. After it is set, firm the soil, water lightly, and cut the main stem to 3 feet. If the tree is container-grown, it is not necessary to prune it after planting.

Bushes. Set fig bushes 4 inches deeper than in the nursery to encourage branching from beneath the soil surface.

Fig Growing Regions



Cultivation

Figs have a shallow root system and should not be cultivated. Just mulch with leaves, pine straw, or other material to conserve moisture and keep weeds under control.

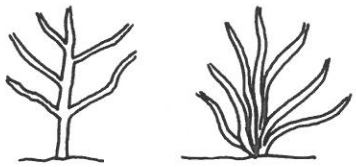
Fertilization

For best results, apply 1 pound of an 8-8-8 fertilizer for each year of age until a maximum of 12 pounds of fertilizer per plant is reached; then maintain this rate each year. (If the age is unknown, a rule of thumb is to apply 1 pound of fertilizer per year for each foot of height.) Apply the fertilizer as follows: on heavy soils, when the buds swell; on sandy soils, one-half the amount as buds swell and the other half in late May. Put the fertilizer over mulch in a circle starting from the ends of the branches and working toward the trunk in a one-foot band.

If the fig plant produces more than 1 to 2 feet of new growth per year, reduce or eliminate nitrogen fertilization. The amount of fertilizer needed depends on the soil's fertility. Overfertilizing with nitrogen promotes succulent growth late in the growing season, a condition or problem that makes plants more susceptible to winter injury. Excessive nitrogen also results in light fruiting, fruit splitting, and souring.

Pruning

Figs require very little pruning. Prune in late winter, just before growth begins. Make smooth clean cuts, close to the lateral branch, and do not leave any stubs. Prune to control the fig tree's height by opening the bush, removing dead wood and suckers from the trunk and main branches, and cutting off the drooping branches. This pruning method produces easier picking, larger fruit, and better control of the tree's vigor. Prune sufficiently to stimulate about a foot of new growth each year on most branches.



Pruning determines whether you will have a fig tree (left) or a fig bush (right). Pruning also stimulates new wood growth, and another fruit develops in the axil of each leaf.

Harvesting and Handling

Figs grown in North Carolina are highly perishable and ferment under ordinary conditions shortly after being picked. You must use the fruit as it ripens, especially in damp weather. The fruit cannot be sun-dried because of the high humidity in North Carolina.

Fresh figs are not tasty until soft and ripe. Therefore, pick them just as the fruit begins to soften. Ripe figs can be stored for a short time at cool temperatures (about 40° F) to retard spoilage and souring.

For preserving, figs may be picked a few days before they are fully ripe. The fruit will hold together better once cooked, a step that reduces the chance for spoilage or souring.

If your skin is sensitive to the fig's milky latex, wear gloves during harvest.

Winter Injury Protection

Fig plants are not completely cold hardy in North Carolina. During severe low temperatures (20° F or less), they may freeze back to the ground. When severe weather is predicted, you can protect plants by covering them with straw, a tarpaulin, cornstalks, or other suitable material. The plants will recover from above-ground injury, but fruiting will be delayed until new growth is forced out.

Young bushes or trees are particularly susceptible to winter injury. In late fall, protect the trunk by piling loose soil or mulch 1 to 2 feet high around the base of the trunk. Remove the soil in the spring when frost is no longer a hazard.

Propagation

New fig plants can be started from cuttings or by simple layering. You can make cuttings 8 to 10 inches long from well-matured wood of the previous season's growth and store them in a cool, dry place until the following spring. In the spring, set the cuttings vertically, 8 to 10 inches apart in furrows 6 to 8 inches deep. Make sure that at least one bud on each cutting is above soil level (top part of cutting up). Let the new plants grow one year and then transplant them to a permanent location.

To propagate the fig by layering, bend a sprout or sucker down and bury it in a trench about 6 inches deep. Leave the tip uncovered. Remove leaves before covering the shoot or sucker with soil.

To propagate by layering, bend branch down and cover with soil. Transplant when rooted.

Why Figs May Fail To Bear Fruit

Frequently, the fig trees will drop their fruit before reaching maturity. If this happens every year and none of the fruit matures, the tree is probably one of the Smyrna varieties.

Smyrna figs require pollination by a special wasp that is not found in North Carolina. The varieties mentioned previously bear fruit without pollination.

If your trees occasionally drop mature fruit, it could be due to excessive nitrogen or shade, winter injury, drought, or poor soil drainage.

Insects and Diseases

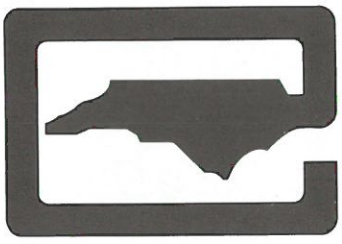
Figs in home plantings are relatively free from serious disease and insect injury, and thus fungicides and insecticides are usually not necessary. But fig roots are often heavily galled, and the plants become stunted because of attacks by root-knot nematodes.

For more information on controlling root-knot nematodes and other fig diseases, write to:

Department of Plant Pathology
N.C. State University
Campus Box 7616
Raleigh, NC 27695-7616

Originally Prepared by
Melvin H. Kolbe
Extension Horticulture Specialist

Revised by
Kathleen M. Williams
Extension Horticulture Specialist (Tree Fruits)



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